

## On the site where a looted liquor store once stood, teens now run Austin Harvest, an open-air market stocked with produce, flowers, and hope

By [Heidi Stevens](#) Chicago Tribune | Aug 20, 2020 at 1:22 PM



*Keith Tankson helps move produce Aug. 19, 2020, at a youth-led, pop-up produce market, which has been created on the former site of a liquor store in the Austin neighborhood.*

*(Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)*

It started with healing circles.

George Floyd had just been killed, and former Chicago Bears linebacker Sam Acho approached [By The Hand Club For Kids](#), an afterschool program in the Austin neighborhood, looking for ways to help push the growing fallout in a positive direction.

Donnita Travis, By the Hand Club's executive director, suggested healing circles to get young people talking — about what Floyd's death meant in their lives, in their communities, in the way they move through the world.

On June 4, Acho and a group of other professional athletes — Bears player Mitch Trubisky; Jason Heyward and Jason Kipnis from the Chicago Cubs; Jonathan Toews from the Chicago Blackhawks; and Ryan Arcidiacono from the Chicago Bulls, among others — gathered with Chicago police officers and young people from across the city.

“We talked about how we, as young teens, could give back to our community in a positive way,” Jeremiah Fuller, a junior at Proviso East, told me.

As they were talking, the topic of food deserts came up. Seventeen liquor stores populated the half-mile radius outside where they were gathered. One, in fact, sat next door to the club.

Fresh produce, on the other hand, was difficult to access.

The group of athletes and students decided to approach the owner of Belmonte Cut Rate Liquors next door. The store had been looted in the days before the healing circle talks, and over a week or so of conversations, the owner agreed to sell the building, said Travis.

Acho and the other athletes covered most of the costs. In early July, they had the store demolished.

In its place, they built Austin Harvest, an open-air market that sells fruits and vegetables, healthy snacks and drinks, and locally sourced flowers from [Flowers For Dreams](#).



*Signs point customers to the new pop-up produce market in the Austin neighborhood Aug. 19, 2020.  
(Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)*

“We learned if you live within 1½ miles of a grocery store, you’re likely to live longer because you have better options to eat healthier,” said Azariah Baker, a sophomore at Westinghouse College Prep. “We’re providing basic necessities here that are incredibly impactful, not only with the food, but with the love and hope we’re also providing.”

The market will be open 2-6 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and will be staffed and run by 10 high school students, including Baker and Fuller.

The official opening takes place Monday. On Wednesday students and community members had gathered for a soft launch.

Students filled giant display bins with tomatoes, grapes, apples, potatoes, yams, cucumbers, romaine lettuce, mustard greens, collard greens, turnip greens and cabbage. A separate stand sold granola bars and bags of popcorn. A cheerful chalkboard sign advertised bottled water, San Pellegrino, Izze and apple juice.

A stage made of wooden pallets and covered with a brightly colored area rug was set up behind the food stands, awaiting the arrival of ConQuest, a local band that would perform later that day to celebrate the opening.

“We’ll have spoken-word nights, poetry, music,” Baker said, “It’s a place where people can come in and showcase their talents. Any way that we can get the community involved in the market, we’re doing.”

“It’s an all-youth-led market,” said Donovan Allison, a sophomore at Christ the King Jesuit College Prep.

Eventually they hope to host cooking demonstrations on the stage as well. Some of that timing will be dictated by COVID-19 safety precautions.



*Azariah Baker, left, and Carrie Waggoner prepare flowers for sale Aug. 19, 2020. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)*

The student employees are completing an educational fellowship funded by the By The Hand Club, Travis said.

“They’re building entrepreneurial skills, life skills,” Travis said. “They’re learning every aspect of business.”

Baker wants to attend law school after college and specialize in family or immigration law. Allison plans to study graphic design and become an animator. Fuller writes his own music and wants to become a producer or a detective. He’s still deciding. I asked if he’ll perform on the market stage.

“I’m thinking about it,” he said.

I spoke with Travis on Wednesday evening, a few hours after I left the market. She said community members were still trickling in and out of the market, shopping for vegetables, filling out feedback cards.

“The sweetest thing was one of the students’ moms,” Travis said. “She came in and stood at the front of the market and saw (her son) DeMarcus serving drinks and just started crying. We said, ‘What do you think?’ She said, ‘I’m just speechless.’”

It’s a delightful and welcome addition to a block that bustles with energy. Moving Everest Charter School sits across Laramie Avenue from the market. New Galilee Missionary Baptist Church is to the market’s north, directly across from Church On the Block.

On the sidewalk outside of By The Hand Club, children’s paintings and pleas cover the wooden trash receptacles. “NO violence!!” “Please put the guns down.” “Let us live please.”

They’re a stark reminder of what Austin Harvest represents, beyond the chance to buy fresh fruits and vegetables.

It’s hope and joy and beauty and investment.

It’s young people identifying a need and deciding they’re the ones to meet it.

It’s grown-ups in their orbit doing their part to help them.

I can’t wait to go back.